DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 991 EC 309 684

AUTHOR	Ostrosky, M. M.; Jung, E. Y.; Hemmeter, M. L. ; Thomas, D.
TITLE	Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules. What Works Briefs.
SPONS AGENCY	Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (DHHS), Washington, DC. Head Start Bureau.; Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (DHHS), Washington, DC. Child Care Bureau.
REPORT NO	No-3
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	6p.; Prepared by the Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.
CONTRACT	PHS-90YD0119
AVAILABLE FROM	Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, 61 Children's Research Center, 51 Gerty Dr., University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Champaign, IL 61820 ($1). Tel: 217-333-4123; Fax: 217-244-7732; e-mail: csef@uiuc.edu; Web site: http://csefel.uiuc.edu. For full text: http://csefel.uiuc.edu/ whatworks.html.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Change; Behavior Development; *Behavior Problems; *Classroom Techniques; *Early Intervention; Educational Practices; Emotional Development; *Planning; Preschool Education; *Prevention; *Scheduling; Social Development
IDENTIFIERS	*Daily Routines

ABSTRACT

Studies have documented that schedules and routines influence children's emotional, cognitive, and social development. Predictable and consistent schedules in preschool classrooms help children feel secure and comfortable. Also, schedules and routines help children understand the expectations of the environment and reduce the frequency of behavior problems, such as tantrums and acts of aggression. This brief provides practical information on the use of schedules and routines with preschoolers. Using a question and answer format, it addresses the following issues: (1) What are schedules and routines?; (2) Why are schedules and routines important?; (3) Who are the children who have participated in research on schedules and routines?; (4) Who are the children who have participated in research on schedules and routines?; (5) Where do I find more information on implementing this practice?; (6) What is the scientific basis for this practice? Examples of how specific practices might be used and a one page summary handout for practitioners and families are included. (SG)

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EC309684

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

Project funded by the Child Care and Head Start Bureaus in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules

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M. M. Ostrosky • E. Y. Jung • M. L. Hemmeter • D. Thomas

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

[NOV. 2002]

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Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, "how to" information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers support young children's social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

Mrs. Rashid hid her nervousness as she smoothed down her sweater and entered the room. This was her first day working in a Head Start and child care facility located in a large metropolitan city, and she wondered if she was up to the job. The original teacher had left suddenly, and Mrs. Rashid found herself feeling unprepared. She and the assistant teacher, Mrs. Johnson, had met the week before to plan and had made a few home visits to meet the children, but they had not had time to visit all of the homes. Mrs. Rashid had just graduated with a degree in elementary education, and she worried whether her college courses had truly prepared her for a classroom full of preschoolers! One hour later, she again doubted herself as she came face to face with a noisy group of 3- and 4-year-olds, all competing for her attention. Gathering up her courage, and recalling the carefully planned morning, Mrs. Rashid squared her shoulders, enthusiastically smiled at the group, and began to learn names, nicknames, and unusual stories from each child. By the end of the morning, both teachers were exhausted from meeting the demands of the children. As they sat in their chairs reflecting on the morning and planning for the next day, both wondered how they would handle Marcus, a boisterous 4-year-old.

What Are Schedules and Routines?

Scheduling refers to deciding who will do what and when they will do it. A consistently followed schedule helps make settings predictable for both young children and adults. Routines are events that are completed on a regular basis, frequently involving a series of responses. Examples include the routines followed when children prepare for a nap (e.g., go potty, gather cot and blanket, take off shoes, lay on cot with blanket, and listen to music) or the routines in place when a group of children prepare to hear an adult read a story.

By the middle of the next morning, Mrs. Rashid decided that she had already used all she had learned in her college courses about children's behavior! She sighed as she watched Marcus bump into a quiet little girl in the dramatic play center. As she picked up the child, Mrs. Rashid's eyes followed Marcus as he ran around the room, pretending to be an airline pilot. She watched helplessly as other children began to run around the room, following his example. Mrs. Rashid felt powerless as she planned for the next day, wondering what she and Mrs. Johnson could possibly do to help improve the classroom situation.

When planning activity schedules and classroom or home routines, caregivers should consider the following factors: the balance of activities, the tempo or pace of activities, young children's attention span, when children are most alert, the number of adults available, other things happening in the classroom (e.g., one child may be receiving speech therapy), and the fact that longer play periods result in higher levels of play behaviors.

In addition, adults can arrange concurrent activity schedules (i.e., two or more optional activities at the same time) to provide choices for children. For example, young children might be able to select from the following centers during a given one-hour block of time each day: art, blocks, housekeeping, book/music corner, or snack table.

At the beginning of the year, adults can teach children routines by using picture and object schedules. They can post these schedules in order for children to become familiar with them and become more independent. If changes are to occur in the schedules, caregivers should review the changes at the beginning of the day to help children feel secure and understand the expectations of their environment.

Mrs. Rashid and Mrs. Johnson decided they needed to pay closer attention to their class schedule. Both recalled from previous training and courses that it was important to consider the physical and emotional environment, as well as the children's routines. They wondered if making some changes to the schedule would help Marcus, as well as the rest of the children. The current schedule consisted of a fairly long circle time at the start of the day, followed by an extended free play time throughout the morning. Children were allowed to wander from center to center as they wanted. In order to facilitate?? the children's interest, the first thing Mrs. Rashid did was to shorten circle time and incorporate more activities for the children to do, rather than simply having them??listening to her read a book. For example, she sang songs while the children clapped along, did hand movements, or played musical instruments. The second thing she did was to better organize free play by establishing some rules

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for the centers (e.g., limiting the number of children in each center). The teachers set up a basic class schedule with pictures representing activities and centers, which allowed the children to visit three centers during a specific time period during the morning, based on their interest level. Mrs. Rashid and Mrs. Johnson still felt that several of the children, including Marcus, needed a little more structure to help them throughout the day. During much of the time, Marcus ran from center to center, knocking things over. Marcus also lost his temper frequently. In order to meet his need for more structure, Mrs. Rashid helped Marcus with an individualized picture schedule, utilizing things that interested him such as his love of books, blocks, and art activities. It was important that Marcus have the structure that he needed but, at the same time, recognize that he had choices and options. Both teachers took turns working with him each morning to go over the class schedule and choose his activities for the day, reminding him that he would have many opportunities to do the things he wanted and play with the toys he desired. His schedule was posted in a special place near his cubby at eye level for him to refer to throughout the day.

Why Are Schedules and Routines Important?

Studies have documented that schedules and routines influence children's emotional, cognitive, and social development. For example, predictable and consistent schedules in preschool classrooms help children feel secure and comfortable. Also, schedules and routines help children understand the expectations of the environment and reduce the frequency of behavior problems, such as tantrums and acts of aggression. Activity schedules that give children choices, balanced and planned activities (small vs. large groups, quiet times vs. active times, teacher directed vs. child directed, indoor vs. outdoor), and individualized activities result in a high rate of child engagement. In addition, the duration of the play period can affect children's social and cognitive forms of play (a play period that is longer than 30 minutes leads to higher levels of social and cognitive play).

Early one morning, about two weeks after the teachers individualized his schedule, Marcus ran to his cubby, looking eagerly for his schedule. He took the bright orange paper down from his cubby and ran over to Mrs. Rashid. Eagerly, he sat down with her and reviewed the schedule for that day, choosing the centers he wanted to visit later in the morning. Mrs. Rashid smiled, realizing that, while this strategy? did not completely solve his behavior issues, it did provide him with several things. First, Marcus met with "Teacher" at least once a day, which he enjoyed! Second, he got the chance to choose which centers he would visit during the morning, a skill?? that enabled him to be more independent. Third, it helped him understand that his time at Head Start included special and fun activities. Marcus continued to be unpredictable at times, but both teachers found that talking with Marcus about his schedule helped him realize that every day held a certain routine. If there were changes, Mrs. Rashid and Mrs. Johnson would help him with the change. The day held a certain predictability and consistency, which helped Marcus anticipate what would happen next.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Schedules and Routines?

Research on schedules and routines has been conducted with a limited group of children in child care settings, inclusive preschools, university preschools, and a state psychiatric institute. When designing schedules and routines, teachers will want to try to meet the cultural, linguistic, and individual needs of the children in their care. For example, a child's medication may cause him or her to become extremely sleepy at certain times of the day, so opportunities to rest or have some quiet time should be built into this child's schedule. Another child might benefit from having words in his home language written on his picture schedule. The importance of adapting strategies to meet the unique needs of the children and families in a teacher's care cannot be overstated.

Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) for additional resources.

Practical information on schedules and routines can be found in journals such as *Young Children, Teaching Exceptional Children, Young Exceptional Children*, and *Young Exceptional Children Monograph Series: Practical Ideas for Addressing Challenging Behaviors*. See the following articles for examples of how to implement aspects of schedules/routines:

Alger, H. A. (1984). Transition: Alternatives to manipulative management techniques. *Young Children, 39*(4), 16-25.

Aspen Systems Corporation (1997). *Enhancing children's growth and development*. Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community. Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services. Module 3.

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We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Mulligan, Morris, Green, Harper-Whalen (1999). *Child Care Plus+ Curriculum on Inclusion: Practical Strategies for Early Childhood Programs*. The University of Montana.

Bird, M., & Kern, C. (1991). *Empowerment through communication: A manual of strategies forimplementing communication systems with severely handicapped individuals*. San Jose, CA: Bird & Kern.

Christie, J. F., & Wardle, F. (1992). How much time is needed for play? *Young Children, 47*(3), 28-32.

Crosser, S. (1992). Managing the early childhood classroom, *Young Children, 47*(2), 23-29.

Lawry, J., Danko, C., & Strain, P. S. (1999). Examining the role of the classroom environment in the prevention of problem behaviors. In S. Sandall & M. Ostrosky (Eds.), *Young Exceptional Children monograph series: Practical ideas for addressing challenging behaviors* (pp. 49-61). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Nordquist, V. M., & Twardosz, S. (1990). Preventing behavior problems in early childhood special education classrooms through environmental organization. *Education and Treatment of Children, 13*(4), 274-287.

Ratcliff, N. (2001). Use the environment to prevent discipline problems and support learning. *Young Children, 56*(5), 84-87.

What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have documented the effects of schedules and routines in early childhood settings:

Christie, J. F. (1988). The effects of play period duration on children's play patterns. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 3*(2), 123-131.

LeLaurin, K., & Risley, T. (1972). The organization of day-care environments: "Zone" versus "man-to-man" staff assignments. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 5*(3), 225-232.

Nordquist, V. M., Twardosz, S., & McEvoy, M. A. (1991). Effects of environmental reorganization in classrooms for children with autism. *Journal of Early Intervention, 15*(2), 135-152.

Tegano, D. W., & Burdette, M, P. (1991). Length of activity periods and play behaviors of preschool children. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 5*(5), 93-99.

Wien, C. A. (1996). Time, work, and developmentally appropriate practice. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 11*(3), 377-393.

This material was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Cooperative Agreement N. PHS 90YD0119). The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial projects, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. You may reproduce this material for training and information purposes.

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Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules

HANDOUT

Schedules and routines are important because:

- They influence a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development.
- They help children feel secure and comfortable.
- They help children understand the expectations of the environment.
- They help reduce the frequency of behavior problems (e.g., tantrums).
- They can result in higher rates of child engagement.

Remember:

- A schedule that is followed consistently helps make settings more predictable for children and adults.
- When planning activity schedules, caregivers should consider the balance of activities (outside vs. inside, active vs. passive, teacher directed vs. child directed, the pace of activities, and the length of young children's attention span).
- Longer play periods can result in higher levels of play behaviors.
- Teachers and caregivers should include blocks of time where children have choices between different activities and materials.
- At the beginning of the school year, caregivers should discuss the classroom schedule using a picture or object chart to help children understand what will come next.

A routine is an event that is completed on a regular basis, frequently involving a series of responses (such as a bedtime routine involving having a snack, bathing, reading a book, and cuddling).

- During routines children learn about the sequence of activities, they begin to anticipate what will happen next, and they work on becoming more independent (e.g., learning to dress and undress).
- Children are less likely to engage in challenging behavior when they are aware of and can anticipate changes in the routine.

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